

Appendix E – Fish Creek Project Draft EA

**FISH CREEK PROJECT
FEE TITLE ACQUISITION
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT**

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:
Rob Brooks
December, 2009

I. INTRODUCTION

Funding for the proposed acquisition would come from three sources: Access Montana Program, Habitat Montana Program, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program. FWP has the authority to use each program's funds through the following laws or administrative rules:

- Access Montana: This program was established through House Bill 5 during the 2007 Legislature. Its purpose is for the land acquisitions, land leasing, easement purchase, or development agreement for state parks and fishing access sites.
- Habitat Montana: Under Administrative Rule 12.9.508-512, FWP has the authority to acquire wildlife habitat for a) the conservation of Montana's wildlife populations and natural communities to keep them intact for future generations; maintain wildlife population levels that sustain or enhance current recreation opportunities; and maintain diverse geographic distribution of native wildlife populations and their habitats, b) the conservation of Montana's land and water resources in adequate quantity and quality to sustain ecological systems, and c) the implementation of habitat management systems that are compatible with and minimize conflicts between wildlife values and traditional agricultural, economic, and cultural values.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program: Per 87-1-709, FWP has the power to acquire lands with federal funds for the one or more of the following purposes: a) protecting or maintaining habitat conditions for fish or wildlife species by placing land under public control or ownership, b) developing or improving habitat conditions to enhance carrying capacity, and/or c) providing public access for the use of fish and wildlife resources.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the fee title purchase of property presently owned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee title acquisition.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The TNC property is located near Tarkio, Mt. in Mineral County. The property that MFWP would acquire lies to the north and south of Interstate 90 about 41 miles west of Missoula and encompasses 40,945 acres of Fish Creek and Nemote Creek. A detailed description of this property is included in the environmental assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

This property contains two habitats that are identified by FWP as Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need. They are the riparian/wetland, a terrestrial community type, and mountain streams, an aquatic community type. The Fish Creek property contains over 25 miles of riparian

habitat.

The Fish Creek project property has long been used for forest resource (timber) production, although no active timber harvest is currently in progress. Timber management was administered by Plum Creek Timber Company (PCT) and its predecessor, Champion International. It was during this latter phase that heavy removal of forest canopy was done and the dense network of access roads was constructed into every part of the property south of the Clark Fork River. Parcels north of the river have also been heavily logged by PCT and the 2005 Tarkio fire affected some areas as well.

Fish Creek supports some of the best remaining native fish populations in the area, provides a major source of salmonid recruitment for the Clark Fork River, and offers an excellent trout fishery throughout most of its reaches. Most tributaries within the watershed offer high quality spawning and rearing habitat for trout. Intact tributary habitat, excellent water quality, consistent instream flows and good connectivity among stream and river reaches have made Fish Creek a stronghold for migratory (fluvial) bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*) in western Montana. Fish Creek currently supports more fluvial bull trout redds than all other middle Clark Fork tributaries combined and the drainage contains numerous (>20) westslope cutthroat trout populations, many of which are genetically non-introgressed. Other fish species present include mountain whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*) and sculpins (*Cottus* spp.), as well as introduced brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) and rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*).

The wildlife this property supports either year-round or on a seasonal basis is extensive. There are a number of Species of Concern (SOC) including grizzly bears, bull trout, lynx, and western toads that use the property. The Fish Creek drainage also provides significant winter range and other seasonal habitats for elk (*Cervus elaphus*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and moose (*Alces alces*). It also supports diverse populations of large carnivores, furbearers and upland game birds, including black bear (*Ursus americanus*), mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), mountain grouse and wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*). For a complete list of species, see the Environmental Assessment.

C. Current Use

Currently the property is owned and managed by TNC. Their goal is to protect the resources values of the lands while improving the habitat. TNC has also continued allowing access for recreational uses such as hunting, fishing, etc.

Under TNC ownership in 2009, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited collaboratively improved stream connectivity and stream crossing conditions, planted and stored closed roads, and began weed control efforts in many drainages within the proposed acquisition. Accomplishments from 2009 include approximately fifty miles of road storage, decommissioning and/or maintenance, removal of approximately forty culverts and cross drains, weed treatment along open and closed road systems, and revegetation of more than 3,500 feet of streambank along the main stem Fish Creek and South Fork Fish Creek corridor where Fish Creek Road

encroaches on the stream.

D. Purchase Alternatives

- Purchase the property fee title.
- No fee title purchase

The purchase of a conservation easement was also discussed but dropped from consideration given they want to sell the property.

MFWP Fee Title Purchase

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks plans to designate two distinct management areas for this property. The first is a wildlife management area that will encompass approximately 34,000 acres and be managed by the agency's Fish and Wildlife Division. The goal is to protect and enhance the fisheries and wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities that meet the management plan. The second management area, approximately 6,900 acres, will be designated a state park and managed by the agency's Parks Division. While the state park concept has been identified, there are no development plans at this time.

No Purchase Alternative

The no purchase alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what TNC does with the property.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife and fisheries habitat and provide for public access to the land. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the fee title purchase.

The financial impacts address the cost of the fee title acquisition by MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e. income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay \$14,350,000 for fee title on this property. The funding will come from Access Montana (14% of the purchase price), the Habitat Montana Program (28% of the purchase price), and the federal aid Pittman-Robertson Program (58% of the purchase price). In addition, Senate Bill 164 passed by the 2009 legislature directs that MFWP establish a maintenance account to address maintenance requirements defined in the bill. With regard to this proposed purchase the maintenance account would amount to \$300,000.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase. The sale of this land by The Nature Conservancy and subsequent title transfer to MFWP will not change the tax revenues that Mineral County currently collects on these lands. MFWP is required by Montana Code 87-1-603 to pay “to the county a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen.” Current taxes on this land are approximately \$50,000 per year based on the current assessment.

B. Economic Impacts

There will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the fee title purchase of this land by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Recreation access is an important component of MFWP management plans for the property and local businesses that provide services will not be negatively impacted.

The Nature Conservancy has allowed one commercial outfitter to utilize the property. However, under MFWP management outfitted hunting will not be allowed although other activities such as guided hiking, biking, horseback riding, etc. are allowed during the months the proposed WMA is open for public use. The amount of hunting use by the outfitter on the lands that FWP is proposing to purchase is unknown, however the commercial hunting restriction will have some financial impact to this operation and a negligible impact to local businesses.

The maintenance and enhancement work that will be needed in Fish Creek will provide opportunities for local businesses and these work efforts will provide some positive economic activity.

The potential development of a state park on 6900 acres of this property would also provide a positive financial impact to surrounding communities that provide goods and services to park visitors.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Fish Creek property fee title purchase by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks will provide long term protection for wildlife habitat in these watersheds, maintain the open space integrity of the land, enhance public recreation opportunities and improve the overall management on the property.

This purchase will not reduce the tax revenues that Mineral County collects on this property under Montana Code 97-1-603.

The financial impacts to local businesses from this purchase will be neutral to positive given that recreational opportunities will not be negatively impacted and FWP will be working to address weed issues, etc.

